

# The lived experiences of women who discovered their partner perpetrated a sexual offence

Eileen Conmy, Garry Prentice, Barbara Hannigan and Timothy James Trimble

## Abstract

**Purpose** – *This study aims to explore the experiences of non-offending partners (NOPs) of men who perpetrated contact and non-contact sexual offences.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with eight women and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.*

**Findings** – *Findings yielded two superordinate themes, eight subordinate themes and an overarching theme. The first superordinate theme “Paying for their Husband’s Transgressions” captured many ways in which the women’s lives were impacted by their husbands offending. The second superordinate theme “Navigating the Darkness” encompassed the women’s experiences of trying to adapt to their new lives. The overarching theme “A Contaminated Life” pertained to the shared experiences of the women who all described encountering instant and profound consequences. This research highlighted the need for immediate signposting to support services for NOPs. The value of a humanistic counselling approach paired with forensic expertise was also identified. Future research with cross-cultural samples and same sex-couples would enrich the current understanding of this experience.*

**Practical implications** – *This research highlighted the need for immediate signposting to support services for NOPs. The value of a humanistic counselling approach paired with forensic expertise was also identified.*

**Originality/value** – *Qualitative research on the experiences of NOPs of men who perpetrated sexual offences is sparse. Furthermore, existing research focuses on the experiences of women whose own children were abused, with the partners of men who have perpetrated extra-familial or non-contact offenses remaining largely neglected.*

**Keywords** Sexual offending, Non-offending partner, IPA, Sexual abuse

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

Much of the public perception of sexual crime is driven by high-profile cases reported in mainstream media; and this has exacerbated concerns in the realm of public safety, especially with regard to men perpetrating sexual violence towards women (Sowersby *et al.*, 2022). Whilst the majority of research has focused on male perpetrators of sexual crime, there is a recent interest in the motivations of female perpetrators (Scurich, 2023). As with male perpetrators, there is a focus in this research domain in establishing accurate prevalence rates, counterbalancing a range of survey sources with officially recorded offending.

In terms of motivation, many contemporary theories put forward a variety of factors which underpin the development of sexual offending (Knight and Sims-Knight, 2003; Malamuth, 2003; Ward and Siegert, 2002). These all cite adverse family developmental experiences as the bases for sexual offending across a wide range of factors. At the individual case

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formulation level, the complexity of competing theories which promulgate sex offending has been elaborated (see: [Willmott et al., 2018](#); [Garrington et al., 2023](#)).

However, in terms of public recognition, and in the research arena, it is only in recent years that attention has been drawn to the impact of sexual offending on non-offending family members or those in close relationship with the perpetrators.

Qualitative research on the experiences of non-offending partners (NOPs) of men who perpetrated sexual offences remains relatively sparse ([Cahalane Parker and Duff, 2013](#); [Iffland et al., 2016](#); [Shannon et al., 2013](#)). Nevertheless, more recent research in this domain, examining the impact and significant repercussions upon NOPs, has emerged. These include multiple losses to existing life prior to the “knock on the door” by the police, and subsequent personal trauma ([Duncan et al., 2022](#)). Similar impacts have been found with regard to the effects on family members of those who have committed online offences with regard to child sexual abuse material ([Armitage et al., 2023](#)).

NOPs often inherit diverse care-providing circumstances as a result of their partners sexual offending, and this has not been given due acknowledgment within the research community ([Philpot, 2009](#)). There is a need for an individualised and shared understanding of female partners support requirements pertaining to psychological well-being and their various societal roles, however, a review of the literature indicates that this is not common practice ([Shannon et al., 2013](#); [Wager et al., 2015](#)). Therefore, despite the importance of the role of the NOP in assisting an individual who has sexually offended with reintegration to the community, and potentially reducing the risk of recidivism, their lived experience is far from understood ([Iffland et al., 2016](#); [Wager et al., 2015](#)). The current research aimed to address this gap by using a socially co-constructed phenomenological enquiry held by a person-centred lens throughout in consideration of the subject matter under review.

Early research on partners of men who perpetrated sexual offences has been criticised for its stigmatising view of women, and its narrow focus on incest ([Cahalane et al., 2013](#); [Dempster, 1993](#)). Themes such as relinquishment of sexual contact ([Maisch, 1973](#)), emotional unavailability ([Weiner, 1964](#)) and collusion with the abuser ([Justice and Justice, 1979](#)) were identified pertaining to NOPs. Alternative perspectives argue that accusations of collusion cause a further disservice to an already stigmatised population ([Joyce, 1997](#)), and reviews of cases have found that collusion by NOPs is in fact rare ([Crawford, 1999](#); [Joyce, 1997](#)). Others argue that the patriarchal social construction of motherhood sets women up to fail ([Dempster, 1993](#); [Hill, 2001](#)), and that in some cases, women are preyed on by men who desire an adult relationship to hide their proclivity for abusing children ([McLaren, 2016](#)).

The discovery of a partners sexual offending has been cited as an acutely stressful experience ([Cahalane et al., 2013](#); [Dempster, 1993](#); [Walsh, 1999](#)) which can lead to experiences of denial, shock and confusion ([McCallum, 2001](#)). The consequences are significant, immediate and long term, and can be similar to bereavement ([Dempster, 1993](#); [Hooper, 1992](#); [Walsh, 1999](#); [Worden, 1991](#)). The absence of prior suspicions also complicates the NOPs ability to make sense of the discovery, leading some to question their ability to evaluate others accurately ([Salter, 1988](#)). Vicarious shame and guilt are experiences that have also been reported by NOPs ([Dempster, 1993](#); [Garrett and Wright, 1975](#); [Hooper, 1992](#)).

The discovery process leads to conflict between the social and psychological roles that the woman assumes; women may become a supervisor of the offending partner, and a protector of vulnerable persons, whilst maintaining their previous roles ([McCallum, 2001](#); [Strand, 2000](#)). This discovery has been cited as so traumatic that some NOPs have described themselves as secondary victims ([Cahalane et al., 2013](#); [Hooper, 1992](#)). However, they are often unrecognised by professionals as such ([Strand, 2000](#)).

Mothers of children who were sexually victimised have been found to approach professional agencies with ambivalence due to being overwhelmed by shock, guilt and self-blame (Dempster, 1993; Hooper, 1992). Furthermore, many women feel let down by professional agencies who fail to recognise their support needs (Cahalane *et al.*, 2013; Dempster, 1993; Hooper, 1992). Despite women's lives being significantly impacted by their partners offending, the primary focus of professional intervention often focuses on assessing their ability to protect children, rather than providing them with support (Hill, 2001; Maynard, 1985).

Stigma by association and felt stigma are frequently reported by NOPs (Garrett and Wright, 1975; Levenson *et al.*, 2007; Levenson and Cotter, 2005) leading to social problems such as isolation (Tewksbury and Levenson, 2009), loss of relationships (Garrett and Wright, 1975), having their abilities as a parent called into question (Hill, 2001; Maynard, 1985) and loss of income (McCallum, 2001; Tewksbury and Levenson, 2009). Furthermore, Cahalane *et al.* (2013) found that less than a quarter of women availed therapeutic support. In the current research, all of the offending partners engaged in group or individual therapy, and the majority of the NOPs engaged in individual or couples' therapy. The therapeutic approaches used in the host services are based on the Good Lives Model (GLM) (Ward and Gannon, 2006). This model aims to equip offenders with the tools they need to live a life that provides meaning and fulfilment, without exploiting or otherwise harming others.

Women whose children have been sexually abused by their partner are frequently expected to choose between the child and the partner (Hooper, 1992). Forgiveness and reconciliation are often not considered as options in this circumstance. Hooper (1992) explained that the recovery from the grief associated with this crime involves reconstructing meaning by adapting to a new life, making sense of the abuse and incorporating the learning into present functioning in a purposeful way (p. 33).

## The current study

The current study included heterosexual female participants who were in relationships with men who admitted to perpetrating sexual offences. All of the participants were married at the time the offending took place. Mann *et al.* (2010) reported that if a man who has sexually offended remains in, or establishes, an appropriate adult relationship, he is less likely to reoffend. Therefore, the NOP can serve as a protective factor, and their needs for support should be addressed appropriately. Given that stigmatised individuals experience problems in forming and maintaining relationships (see Quinn and Chaudoir, 2009), it is important to explore the factors which can support individuals who are prepared to have relationships with a stigmatised individual. Shannon *et al.* (2013) highlighted the importance of a collaborative effort to understand and work with the unique needs of NOPs who they recommend should be viewed as clients with specific needs in and of themselves.

Current ethical guidelines for psychologists working with individuals who are socially excluded encourage acknowledgement, understanding and respect for diversity in tandem with holding central the professional responsibility to promote equality and opportunity. Furthermore, psychologists have the responsibility to emphasise the connection between social exclusion and mental health problems [British Psychological Society (BPS), 2017; Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), 2011]. This research aimed to address these guidelines by giving the participants a voice and highlighting the adversity NOPs endure. Giving a voice to the disenfranchised can increase awareness and challenge oppressive, unfair or stigmatising societal conditions. The research question explored is "What is the lived experience of women who discovered that their partner perpetrated a sexual offence?", The research included five domains of inquiry, namely, (1) the discovery process, (2) attachment and intimacy pre- and post-discovery,

(3) impact on participant, (4) impact on children and family life and (5) lived experience and learning.

## Methodology

### *Research design*

This research used a qualitative phenomenological design and a semi-structured interview schedule designed by the authors. This included exploration of the experience of finding out about their partners' offending, if there were supports availed of, level of intimacy and the range of impacts upon themselves and their families and life circumstances. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; [Smith, 1996](#)) was the chosen approach for data analysis. The research question is: what is the lived experience of women who are in a relationship with a man who perpetrated a sexual offence?

### *Participants*

Eight adult women were recruited through two community-based forensic services. These services use counselling, clinical and forensic psychologists who provide therapy to individuals who have sexually offended and their significant others. Participants were selected using purposeful (extreme case) sampling. Inclusion criteria were (1) participants were female, (2) over 18 years of age and (3) in a relationship with a man who admitted to perpetrating a contact or non-contact sexual offence. Participants age ranged from 34 to 65, and the length of marriages ranged from 8 to 39 years (see [Table 1](#)).

Four of the participants attended the host services for individual therapy and were recruited through their clinicians. The remaining four participants were recruited through their partners, who were engaging in either individual or group therapy in the host services. One participant who did not satisfy all of the inclusion criteria was included in this study but given that this participant was passionate about taking part, it was considered important to include her data. Therefore, six of the participants were married to men who committed non-contact offences, one was married to a man who committed contact (incest) offences and one was divorced from a man who committed contact offences during their marriage.

### *Materials*

A semi-structured open-ended interview schedule was designed by the primary author to gather data for this study. The interview schedule was created by reviewing the relevant literature to identify areas for inquiry. Questions were open ended to facilitate the emergence of phenomenological data. The interview comprised of 10 questions and the duration of each ranged from 74 min to 132 min, with the average interview time of 103 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Table 1** Participant demographics

| <i>Participant</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>Relationship duration (years)</i> | <i>Nature of husband's offence</i>                     |
|--------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Nora               | 58         | 40                                   | Incest, defilement of a child under 15 years           |
| Hana               | 46         | 13                                   | Production and possession of CSAI                      |
| Ann                | 51         | 20                                   | Rape, defilement of a child under 15 years             |
| Victoria           | 65         | 35                                   | Possession of illicit pornography – nature unspecified |
| Lorraine           | 34         | 12                                   | Possession of CSAI                                     |
| Linda              | 43         | 16                                   | Possession and distribution of CSAI                    |
| Sandra             | 45         | 8                                    | Possession of CSAI                                     |
| Maeve              | 40         | 10                                   | Possession of CSAI                                     |

**Note:** CSAI = child sexual abuse imagery

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethical aspects of this study were given careful consideration from the outset. Prior to conducting the research, ethical approval for the current study was granted by the university in which the study was conducted. Both host organisations agreed to accept ethical approval for the study from the university and to provide clinical support to participants. Full informed consent was obtained in writing prior to the interviews taking place, and participants were assured that they could withdraw their data without explanation at any stage. Contact details for external support services were also provided in the debriefing process.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, all information and data were treated as strictly confidential, and this was communicated clearly to participants. An archival number was assigned to each participant's data for anonymity and confidentiality purposes. The researcher also abstained from using the participants' real names and personal details both in supervision and in this article (pseudonyms were assigned). Encrypted data was stored in a safe locked cabinet and the researcher adhered to the university's data retention guidelines.

### *Credibility and trustworthiness*

The researcher endeavoured to maintain transparency by carefully documenting each stage of the research, and regularly meeting with the primary research supervisor to discuss the project. Audits of data were conducted with the research supervisors and a peer-researcher for credibility checks. The descriptions and interpretations gleaned from the data were persistently reviewed to hone accuracy in representing the participants' responses (Thorne, 2008), and the checks in place have been applied systematically, and rigorously following rounds of checks and credibility cross checks between the research team members with the aim of enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Morrow, 2005). The findings were consensually agreed and any discrepancies arising were discussed and reviewed until agreement between researchers was achieved. Verbatim quotes were included in the findings to support the validity of the themes.

## **Results**

The analytical process facilitated the identification of rich and meaningful insights into women's experiences of being in a relationship with a man, who they later learned, had perpetrated a sexual crime. Two superordinate themes were identified, along with eight subordinate themes, and an overarching theme. Verbatim extracts are presented to illustrate the interpretative process, and to substantiate the researcher's interpretations. To protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms have been allocated and some demographic details have been altered.

### *Superordinate theme 1: paying for their husband's transgressions*

This superordinate theme emerged as one of the most salient aspects of participants' experiences in the aftermath of learning of their husbands sexual offending. All eight participants described experiencing psychological distress and feeling forgotten, unsupported or abandoned. The women conveyed a sudden and drastic change to their lives, in which they had to grapple with this inconceivable discovery in isolation. This was compounded by an initial lack of awareness of any services that could be of support to them. Participants' entry into the world of being a wife of a man who had offended this way appeared to be fraught with chaos, fear and isolation. In this regard, participants described living on the knife's edge indicated by accounts of a fear of sleeping, going to the shops and experiencing paranoia. Maeve described a constant state of hypervigilance "literally

every car I heard coming down the road, I was at the window, because in my head they [police] were coming back". Nora captured the essence of the women's fear when sharing her experience; "I never slept, never slept. I used to wait until it was bright to go asleep. I never slept when it was dark when all this came out. I was too afraid to go asleep".

Sandra was the only participant whose husband's offending was known by the greater public. She stated, "I feel like I'm walking on egg shells all the time". Along with the judgement she experienced, she described being afraid to wear her wedding ring, or hold hands with her husband in public, for fear of reprisal. Sandra's fear was well grounded in reality as she had experienced stigma and victimisation as a result of staying with her husband, and eventually felt forced into leaving her employment which involved working with children.

This section delineates the four subordinate themes which capture the experience of the women subsequent to the discovery of their husband's clandestine activities: The Betrayed Women, The Invisible Women, The Defective Women and The Guilty Women. Please see *Superordinate Theme 1 and Corresponding Subordinate Themes* for additional excerpts from the participants' data.

*Superordinate theme 1: paying for their husband's transgressions.*

*Your life is falling down and you're struggling to put it, there's nowhere to go, there's no where to turn. You have all these people coming in and they're talking about offenders and they're talking about victims and they're talking about all this, but they never talk about the people that's left to pick up the pieces.*

The Betrayed Women:

*As I said, if you put 100 people into a room, he would be the last person that you would think would do it (crying). The last person, I just trusted him so much.*

The Invisible Women:

*My whole life has been turned upside down and then I just get left, this bombshell is dropped and then you're just left and nobody is ringing to see, to offer you any kind of support or, and as well its something you cant talk to people about.*

The Defective Women:

*Yea because like for a while it kinda was like "did I do something that made him do it?"*

The Guilty Women:

*Like occasionally I sensed that there's something he's doing and say I come home from work in the evening and I see him and he looks a bit kind of embarrassed or he looks a bit kind of sheepish or you know he's a bit like, there's something. But I never asked.*

***The betrayed women***

Six of the eight participants learned of their husbands' sexual crimes as a result of their houses being raided by the authorities. These raids were all in relation to internet offending. Sandra described how the impact of this betrayal was compounded by the timing:

*The [date] of December was when the [police] called and we would have been married a year on the [date], so that was very difficult. So I love Christmas, but now I don't really feel the same about it anymore.*

Linda conveyed her disbelief when faced with the realisation that her husband had been viewing Child Sexual Abuse Imagery (CSAI) subsequent to their house being raided; "this is [husband], of all the people in the world that I know he'd be the last person I would have thought as doing something like this, the last person". Her betrayal was multi-layered as her



husband initially lied about the severity of the content he viewed; while she was coming to terms with the idea that he had been viewing pictures of adolescent girls, he later disclosed that much of the content pertained to sexual abuse of infants.

### *The invisible women*

Seven of the participants spoke of feeling isolated and forgotten in the aftermath of the discovery of their husband's crimes. Nora, whose husband sexually abused their daughter over several years, explained "you're on your own with it because there's nobody wants to know about it [sexual offending]". Nora's husband's crimes were so heinous that she conveyed not feeling safe to confide in anyone outside her immediate family prior to the research interview, leaving her isolated with this pain for over two years.

Sandra, whose husband was found in possession of CSAI by the authorities, conveyed her desire for connection with others who were going through similar experiences, but not knowing where to find this:

*Yea so that's why like I'd love to talk to like, you know you can't really cos I did think of trying to set up a support group (laughs) for, but how would you go about that? 'If your husband did that please contact me!' Like you know, you can't, do you know?*

Linda echoed the sentiments of the other women when speaking about the aftermath of her husband being apprehended, and subsequently charged with, possession and distribution of over 7,000 child sexual abuse images and videos:

*You know [police] came, took everything, and then we were just left, you know? There was nobody ringing to see 'how are you?' you know? Nothing like that, I don't know, I guess it's not the [polices'] job to be ringing to see how we are but it did feel like this huge thing has happened, my whole life has been turned upside down and then I just get left.*

### *The defective women*

Five of the participants described experiencing internal conflict pertaining to how they viewed themselves subsequent to learning of their husband's offending, specifically how they viewed themselves in their different roles as a woman, a wife and for some, as a mother. Anne revealed that she questioned herself as a wife and a woman when trying to comprehend why her husband sexually abused her niece. Her thoughts imply that at one stage, she believed that these perceived defects may have had some causal factor in her husband's crime:

*Was I not enough? Was I not good enough as a wife? Like I really felt that it was my fault and that I was lacking in something, that there was something wrong with me as a wife, as a woman, you know?*

Linda noted there had been an absence of sexual contact in her marriage in the years leading up to discovering her husband had been accessing CSAI. Linda provided an account of a conversation she had with her husband, where he blamed her appearance for being a contributing factor in his offending, after he began sleeping on the sofa:

*He told me after this all happened [...] that em [...] he said "I really wanted you to make an effort and lost weight" and he said "I couldn't see you make, so I just didn't bother coming, even coming to bed because you wouldn't make an effort to lose weight to stop snoring." So he would just stay on the couch.*

Victoria asked "what will they [her children] think of me?" for having had a lengthy marriage to a man who was no longer allowed to have access with his grandchild as a result of the illicit material he viewed on-line.

### *The guilty women*

Three of the women disclosed having a gut feeling that something was wrong prior to learning of their husband's offending, but not trusting their instinct. Nora indicated that she had previously asked her daughter if she was being abused when recalling her daughters disclosure; "She [daughter] said 'mam, you asked me years ago' she says 'did Dad ever touch me'. She says, 'he did'". Anne referred to a strong gut feeling that she could not ignore, leading her to confront her husband and subsequently report him to the authorities:

*I just couldn't get [niece] out of my mind for some reason or other, I don't know why! To this day I do not know why! But you know when you get something in your gut feeling and I was thinking 'there's something going on now, there's something about [niece], there's something going on, there's something not right!'*

Of note, Anne who was the only participant who followed through on her felt sense, was also the only participant who immediately ended her marriage of 20 years when her husband admitted to sexually abusing her niece. She disclosed the fears she had regarding how others would now perceive her, and recalled wondering if her integrity would be called into question:

*And I suppose I used to think like if people know, what are they going to think about me? How could she marry a man like that? She had to have known, sure why, you know and I just felt filthy because I thought "imagine, I sleep with a man who wants to sleep with children" you know?*

Linda echoed concerns about what it would mean for herself concept to stay married to a man who had been viewing images and videos of infants being sexually abused. She recalled thinking "does that make me you know [...] not guilty but [...] just, what's wrong with me if I'm staying with somebody like that?"

### *Superordinate theme 2: navigating the darkness*

All eight of the participants had difficulty trying to make sense of their husband's crimes. Furthermore, the women described trying to acclimate to a new life that was filled with fear and uncertainty. This section delineates the four subordinate themes which captured the women's experiences of learning to live a new life, comprising of, unfamiliar rules and expectations: A Heavy Burden, A Moral Conflict, A Precarious Future and The Reconciled Women. Please see *Superordinate Theme 2, Corresponding Subthemes and Overarching Theme* for additional excerpts from the participants' data.

#### *Superordinate theme 2: navigating the darkness.*

*I'm quite spiritual and I love angels and I believe that there's light and there's dark, I try to be in the light as much as possible and if you're holding on to darkness it doesn't help. But this is very dark for me [...].*

#### *A Heavy Burden:*

*There's no unsupervised access so it's hard to have [daughter] always with me.*

#### *A Moral Conflict:*

*It sounds ridiculous to say but death would be easier, a death would be easier, you know?*

#### *A Precarious Future:*

*And I don't know whether next week I'm going to be in that house, next month, next year. I don't know what's going to happen. But I'd have to leave the home because of it [husbands offending].*

#### *The Reconciled Women:*



*I stayed because I thought he was worth fighting for, I thought our marriage was worth fighting for. So now we have to try and get that back on track.*

*Overarching theme: a contaminated life.*

*It [sexual offending] invades your space, your being, your way of life, like a cancer. It's just everywhere all at once.*

### **A heavy burden**

Seven of the eight participants described the drastic changes imposed on family life to safeguard their children and grandchildren. Uniquely, Lorraine and her husband decided to conceive a child after she learned of his offending. Given the nature of her husband charges, he has never been allowed to spend time alone with their two-year-old daughter:

*I put her to bed every night, [husband] can't do that. There's little things, like he can never bring her for a walk, em so there's bits like that this is tough, its hard, do you know that kind of way. And not just like because I'd like a break, but it's hard for her and him that they don't get that time.*

Linda noted that her husband is no longer allowed to spend time unsupervised with their teenage sons, and that her parenting was brought into question by social services:

*Yea the amount of files that were, severe files I suppose. So we came in, we had a meeting with them [social services] and they said that they don't want [husband] to be alone with the boys at any stage, and they want to do a risk assessment on him and a capability to protect assessment on me to make sure that you know, I'm capable of protecting my children.*

She described wanting to protect her children from ever learning of their fathers offending, however, due to the new restrictions on family life, this was not possible.

### **A moral conflict**

An illuminating finding was one that compared sexual offending to death, where three participants believed that a death would be easier to cope with. Victoria captured the heinous nature of her husband's offending and described why it would be easier if he died:

*Em because [with death] there is a reason eh and there's a start and a stop point and you can move on. The memory of this person has changed forever. Your understanding of this person has changed forever. Em it [sexual offending] makes your life tainted, there's a taint, because it never goes away.*

Linda echoed these sentiments when reflecting on a conversation with her husband:

*He said 'do you know what, I'd be better off dead' and I remember thinking, I didn't say, I just kinda went 'ah don't be saying that like' but I remember thinking 'yeah it would be better off, we' [...]. I suppose I wasn't really thinking it, but I was thinking, 'yeah, we'd have our mortgage paid, you know it would be fine, you know and they [children] would never have to find out about what you've done' and all that sort of stuff.*

In contrast to these views, Hana believed that her husband's life was more important than his offending past. She described how he had been missing for hours prior to the police raiding their house, leading her to worry that something terrible had happened. For this reason, the news that he was in police custody for committing a sexual offence seemed less horrifying than the alternative. Hana explained "yeah, so it's really as long as he is alive. Yeah so that thought kind of kept me going. Whatever he did, he didn't kill people".

These sentiments reflect the taboo nature of the crimes committed and the associated societal attitudes. The nature of their husbands' crimes is deemed as so unacceptable that the value of their lives is diminished. These statements also seem to capture an undertone

of murderous rage that some participants experienced towards their husbands for the betrayal and humiliation they experienced.

### *A precarious future*

Seven of the participants described a future filled with uncertainty. They were waiting to discover if their husbands would go to prison, and if the offending would become public knowledge by being reported by the media. Furthermore, they were uncertain of the future of their living situations. Maeve described the agony associated with waiting: "It's just so difficult and I think 60% is the limbo with the case and the waiting, and the rest of it is the difficulty with holding this secret for the rest of your life."

Lorraine's situation uniquely captured the concept of waiting in uncertainty; after her husband received a suspended sentence, the authorities returned stating that they wanted the case to be re-examined because they believed his punishment was too lenient:

*So just as you think were getting, so then after the court case then a [police man] knocked on the door and handed [husband] the thing to say the DPP [Director of Public Prosecutions] are appealing it for being too lenient and not being a big enough deterrent for other people.*

When asked what advice they would give to women who will find themselves in this situation in the future, most of the participants emphasised how important it is to be cautious in all aspects of managing the "fallout" of their husband's crimes. Some of the participants cautioned against impulsive disclosures, with one stating "hold your tongue and find the right people to talk to". In this regard, participants recommended speaking to a therapist before deciding who to tell, as confiding in the wrong person carried the risk of making a horrible situation worse. Furthermore, participants highlighted how important it is to see a therapist who has trained in working with forensic populations. Furthermore, Sandra suggested "I think that going forward the [police] should have those cards, the in their back pocket to give to the women so that, you know, 'don't confide in a sister or a brother or whatever, this is the person to ring [support service]'".

### *The reconciled women*

Seven of the women were still married at time of interview, and one was divorced. Six of the women intended to stay in their marriages and one stated that she intended to leave her husband once she had consolidated some financial security. The women provided a variety of reasons for their choices. The participants who intended on working on their marriages attributed this choice to their husband's engagement in treatment to address their offending behaviour. Furthermore, some participants described how remorse shown by their husbands helped them to consider forgiveness. In comparison, the participant who ended her marriage and the participant who intended to end her marriage noted their husband's failure to express remorse, and characterised these men as narcissistic and predatory. One illuminating finding was that some of the women found their relationship had been strengthened as a result of going through this experience.

Hana described how her marriage had strengthened and evolved since her husband was arrested, and contributed this to his long-term involvement in a group therapy programme. She explained "now we have the actual real relationship, that's why I can feel that it's getting stronger, our relationship, our bond and so yea it's good". Hana stated that she intends to wait for her husband if he receives a custodial sentence, with the view to starting a new life when he is released.

Lorraine described how she came to the conclusion that her marriage was worth salvaging; "em but after a while and after thinking I just thought that maybe that there was something worth fighting for". Like Hana, Lorraine conveyed a new level of openness in her marriage and a more adaptive approach to managing conflict. Both participants also expressed the

ability to see their husband as more than an offender, which helped them with the process of forgiveness.

Linda did not convey this as it had only been three months since the discovery. However, she identified the need for her and her husband to change their relational style, which she described as conflict avoidant “we don’t fight, we don’t argue, but we just don’t communicate effectively. So that’s always been a problem and it’s still is, and now it matters, now it really matters.” In contrast, Anne, who ended her marriage, described how she experienced personal growth from going through the experience; “I have a piece of mind now that I never really had. But I didn’t know I didn’t have it, until now I have it if that makes sense. I suppose I found myself through it all”.

### ***Overarching theme: a contaminated life***

In conclusion, the participants described how painful and dismantling it was for them to learn that their husband had been leading an illicit double life, which entailed child sexual abuse. They had to come to terms not only with being betrayed, but also the fact that their husband had deviant sexual interests which could lead to imprisonment, and in one case did. Due to the severity of the crimes perpetrated by their husbands and the vicarious shame and guilt, the participants felt isolated and invisible. A lack of support compounded this isolation. Some of the participants questioned themselves as women and wives, leading them to contemplate if they had influenced their husbands offending. All of the women had to come to terms with the drastic changes in their lives, and confront the reality that life could never be the same. Their uncertain futures lead them to adapting to the stress and confusion. Most of the women wanted to repair their marital relationships but acknowledged that this would require a great deal of work. The accounts given by the participants described how every aspect of their lives was impacted by their husbands offending in a “ripple effect” and that their lives could never be the same.

## **Discussion**

The main aim of this study was to explore the experiences of women who discovered that their husband had perpetrated a sexual offence. Results yielded rich insights into these experiences, which were fraught with an array of consequences. All eight women were forced to adapt to a new way of living. Some of the participants reported that their relationship was able to grow as a result of changing their relational style and having therapeutic support. Findings will be discussed in relation to the two superordinate themes and the overarching theme identified by the analysis.

### ***Paying for their husband’s transgressions***

Similar to previous research, the current study highlighted that the discovery of a partner’s sexual offending is an acutely stressful experience (Armitage *et al.*, 2023; Duncan *et al.*, 2022; Cahalane *et al.*, 2013; Walsh, 1999) and the participants conveyed experiencing a loss of trust and shame. The impact of this discovery had a profound effect on how the women viewed themselves as wives and mothers, and caused some to question their ability to judge others effectively. In this instance, some of the women questioned their value as sexual partners and wondered if this perceived deficit may have impacted on their husband’s decision to perpetrate a sexual crime (see McCallum, 2001).

Consistent with existing research, the women viewed themselves as secondary victims of the abuse perpetrated by their husbands, and some reported that this caused them to experience vicarious guilt for either not knowing the offending was taking place, or not trusting their gut that something was wrong (Dempster, 1993; Hooper, 1992; Salter, 1988; Garrett and Wright, 1975) reported that the women in their study did not appear to

experience shame or guilt; the findings of the current study are not consistent with these findings. Furthermore, the absence of previous knowledge or suspicions compounded the shock, and the participant's difficulty with making sense of it (Cahalane *et al.*, 2013; Hooper, 1992).

This research found that the women felt the need to keep their husbands offending a secret due to fear of social reprisal. This caused them to become isolated, which is consistent with the findings of other studies (Garrett and Wright, 1975; McCallum, 2001; Tewksbury and Levenson, 2009). Participants described a lack of knowledge of support services, or who to ask for such a recommendation. Some participants described instances where they or their husband attended therapists who were ill equipped to support them or who openly passed judgement on them, which caused further distress. All participants stated that this was the first involvement they had in criminal proceedings and for this reason, they needed a safe place to discuss the situation. Most participants feared approaching the authorities to discuss the case, and all found it extremely helpful when they could be provided with this information by the support staff in the host services. Most of the participants recommended that the authorities should furnish NOPs with the contact details for support services at first contact.

Although none of the participants knew of their partner's offending, the participants who were married to men who perpetrated contact offences, disclosed having stronger previous inclinations than the wives of the men who committed non-contact offences; Cahalane *et al.* (2013) noted that there may be less warning signs when the offending is non-contact as opposed to incest. This is a finding that may warrant further investigation as non-contact offending appears to have more subtle warning signs, and further information on how to detect this would be useful in prevention.

### *Navigating the darkness*

All of the participants described being devastated by the consequences of their husbands offending. Unlike previous research, which indicated that the impact extra-familial abuse is less severe than incest (Galloway and Hogg, 2008), all participants appeared to be profoundly impacted. There was a consensus that, regardless of the type of offending, it was considered equally abhorrent. Participants feared social reprisal should their husbands offending become public knowledge. This felt stigma instilled fear in participants and caused them concern for what the future would hold (Garrett and Wright, 1975; Levenson and Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury and Levenson, 2009).

Similar to previous findings, the women inherited new roles in managing the day-to-day activities. These roles were described as conflicting, such as having to supervise their husband when he was in contact with children (Strand, 2000). This new way of life leads some participants to contemplate the morality of their husband's crimes, where sexual offending was compared to death or murder in terms of severity. This theme was found in previous research (Walsh, 1999). Child sexual abuse is one of the most stringent taboos in society (McCallum, 2001) and, therefore, it is naturally compared in severity to death and murder by some.

All of the participant's husbands had engaged in either group or individual therapy informed by GLM principles. Participants who intended to repair their marriages attributed therapeutic input as being a major factor in the process of healing, along with improving their communication and learning to manage conflict in a functional way. These findings are consistent with GLM theory which posits that, by helping individuals who have offended sexually to develop the skills to seek and maintain meaningful relationships, which are not based on manipulation or exploitation, their risk of further offending is reduced (Ward and Gannon, 2006). The current findings add insight from the perspective of the non-offending wife who can benefit from the therapeutic work indirectly.

Previous research found that NOPs were largely satisfied with their relationships (Iffland *et al.*, 2016) and that some believed that their relationships were strengthened as a result of learning their partner had perpetrated a sexual crime (Garrett and Wright, 1975). The current research supports these findings, however, it adds depth to how they can be understood. The women who stated they were satisfied and/or that their relationships had strengthened described how this had taken a great deal of work. Furthermore, they described how they were only able to salvage the marriages as a result of their partner showing remorse for his actions, and due to his engaging in long term therapy to address the offending. The participants who intended to work on their marriages highlighted how essential it was for them to address how conflict was managed in their marriages. Perhaps this finding was clarified in light of the person-centred approach taken by the researcher, where the women were welcomed to expand on what they thought was important, without being judged.

Previous research found that female partners gained some pleasure as a result of the situation they were in, and that they felt superior to their husbands (Garrett and Wright, 1975). However, the current research did not support this finding; the women reported a profound sense of devastation and all conveyed how they wished that it had not happened. Iffland *et al.* (2016) found that the majority of their participants seemed to have mutually agreed not to discuss their partners offending; most of the participants in the current research did not report this. Those participants who intended to work on their marriages described how essential it was to have an open dialogue around the offending behaviour to heal the relationship and prevent further occurrences.

The theme of women blaming themselves for their partners offending has appeared in the literature over decades (Bastani and Kentsmith, 1980; Dempster, 1993; Garrett and Wright, 1975; Hill, 2001; Hooper, 1992). This is an ongoing issue that women in this situation struggle with, and one that needs attention. Education around causes of sexual offending and responsibility would be a useful part of systemic interventions.

### ***A contaminated life***

Similar to other findings (Dempster, 1993; Hooper, 1992; Walsh, 1999; Worden, 1991) the women in the current research described the consequences of their husbands sexual offending as all encompassing, invading all aspects of their lives and with no clear indication of when the consequences would end. The women described feeling traumatised, which has been cited in the literature as experiences of secondary victimisation (Cahalane *et al.*, 2013). This discovery appeared to induce a type of grief for the way of life that was lost.

### ***Social action suggestions***

The current research identified the theme of morality, where sexual offending is perceived to lie on the spectrum of heinous acts; in the current research sex offending was seen by some participants as being worse than death. This was also found in previous research where the ideas of their husbands being killed in an accident or convicted of murder were perceived as less devastating than learning their husband would be branded as a 'sex offender' (Walsh, 1999; Winder and Gough, 2010). Given these findings, it is clear that confidential and non-judgemental support is required to support partners of men who are being investigated for sexual crimes.

Furthermore, as most of the women learned of their husbands offending as a result of a house raid, some participants stated they would have had much clearer guidance if the police provided them with contact details of a support service from whom they could immediately seek advice. Most of the participants explained that it took them several months to identify such services, which lead one participant to seeking out a service in the

UK. Some participants advised they attended their GP for support, but only one woman reported that her GP had knowledge of a forensic counselling service. Participants highlighted how essential it is to be supported by a therapist who is both person-centred and knowledgeable on forensic counselling.

### *Limitations and future directions*

The results of this research should be interpreted in light of several limitations. Firstly, recruitment yielded only eight participants despite efforts made to recruit more women over a one-year period. Some of the women who declined to participate cited reasons such as fear that it may further incriminate their partners, or because they were too distressed due to having just learned of their husbands offending. Others stated they would consider taking part at a later stage when they had come to terms with the shock, however, due to time constraints of the current research it was beyond the scope of the study to approach these women again in the future. Furthermore, further research should be conducted to explore same-sex couples' experiences specifically.

Most of the participants were in relationships with men who perpetrated non-contact sexual offences against children, and their experiences may be quite different to the experiences of partners of men who committed contact offences against adults. In addition, the lived experiences of women from racial or ethnic minorities may not be well represented in this study as seven of the women were white-Irish and one was Asian.

Considering these limitations, future research on cross-cultural samples of women would be beneficial to examine how this phenomenon is experienced different countries, as societal attitudes and national laws bear a large influence on how sexual offending is perceived. In addition, research on same-sex couples would also add a valuable contribution to the existing literature. Finally, a quantitative research approach would add rich knowledge to the existing literature.

### *Strengths*

Despite these limitations, the current study's use of phenomenological enquiry yielded rich and novel findings, which provide insight into the experiences of the women, of whom little is known. Furthermore, conducting this research entailed reaching out to very isolated women and giving them an opportunity to tell their stories, which most of the women stated they found meaningful. In addition, the researcher had the opportunity to provide the participants with information on support services, with the hope that this may help to resource them.

### *Recommendations*

The results of this study highlight how essential non-judgemental support is for NOPs. This places counselling psychology in an advantageous position to support women and families of individuals who have perpetrated sexual crimes. Furthermore, it is essential that counselling is provided by clinicians who have experience in forensic work and who are adept at working with trauma, vicarious guilt and shame. The current research highlighted the specific psychological and practical needs that women in this situation have and how essential it is that these needs are attended to in any intervention, consistent with recommendations made by Cahalane *et al.* (2013). Furthermore, the lack of signposting to appropriate services was highlighted as a major compounding factor to the stress experienced by the women, and it is recommended that authorities investigating these crimes consider the family system and needs of each member. As recommended by one participant, authorities carrying out raids on suspected offenders' homes could provide information leaflets and contact details for support services to the NOPs at this juncture.



## Conclusion

Over 25 years ago, Dempster (1993) advocated “listen and learn from the women themselves, and acknowledge the complexity and dynamics of their experience” (pp. 70–71). Unfortunately, to this day this does not seem to be a common approach. The future of counselling psychology is one that holds central inclusive practice and diversity, and, therefore, an emphasis on specialised training to support the disenfranchised members of society is essential to balance the scales.

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